

**Sermon for Zion, January 28, 2018 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage**

**Hymns:** 420 – Praise, I Will Praise; Grace Greater Than Our Sin; 632 – Help us accept each other; 648 – I’m gonna live so

**Scripture:** Matthew 1:1-17

**Sermon Title:** Four Unlikely Women

**Matthew 1:1-17 (NRSV)**

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

*Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.*

*And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*

*And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

*So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*

There you are, determined to respond to the challenge and opportunity of reading through the Gospels, a chapter a day, so you open right up to Matthew, Chapter One, and the first thing you run into is this boring genealogy. Seventeen verses of largely unknown and unpronounceable names. We’re familiar with a few of them - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - but then things get murky: Perez, Zerah, Tamar, Hezron, Aram, Aminidab... not the names of your neighbours, by and large, and

not the names familiar to us from dimly remembered Sunday School. So we skip ahead to the end, and find, to our considerable relief, Joseph and Mary, and soon we're back on familiar ground as the Christmas story gets underway.

But this ancestry – that's heavy going. Let's say for a moment that you didn't skip right over it, and took a bit of time figuring out just who these people are, these names carefully chosen by Matthew to populate his Messianic ancestral list. You go into it expecting the geneology of Christ to be an especially pious one, filled with all the right people, people of outstanding moral character and impeccable blood-lines, a veritable Who's Who of historical Hebraic high society.

It may surprise you, then (but I doubt disappoint you) to learn that such is not the case. For mixed in among this tangle of forty-two solemn Jewish patriarchs are four matriarchs, a few loose women, if you will: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the unnamed mother of Solomon, former wife of Uriah, mistress of... well, we get ahead of ourselves. In learning their stories, you may discover that these women singled out by Matthew are not the sort you would prefer to stand in line behind at the bank, or sit beside on the bus, or live in the same part of town with, these Biblical bad girls. But let's hear their stories nonetheless.

Their story starts way back in the mists of time with a fellow named Judah, who happened to be a son of Jacob, and who therefore was a brother of the famous Joseph, the fellow with the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat. Now Judah had three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. Judah, according to the custom of the day, found a nice wife for his eldest, and this is the heroine of our first story, Tamar.

We don't know much about the marriage of Tamar and Er. We don't know how long they were married. We do know, though, that Er and Tamar didn't have any children, and we also have grounds to suspect that life with Er was not all it was cracked up to be. For of Er's story, we have been given but this brief biographical note, found in the Book of Genesis, 38:7 - *Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the LORD put him to death.*

If you think Er gets bad press in the Scriptures, wait until you hear about his brother, Onan. You see, according to custom, when a fellow died childless, it was up to his brother to take the widow in and provide her with a child, that the brother's name might continue. So Tamar ends up with Onan, whose responsibility it was to impregnate Tamar with a child of her own, but through some devious slight of hand, he managed to obey the spirit but not the letter of this particular law, and, we read, "*What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight; so he put him to death also.*"

By this time, you begin to get a flavour of poor Tamar's life. Father-in-law Judah was getting a bad taste in his mouth too, and so although tradition decreed

that his youngest son Shelah take Tamar in, Judah was down to his last son, and Tamar seemed like bad luck. So to buy time, he diplomatically suggested that Tamar pack her bags and move back in with her parents, at least until Shelah was a little older.

The years pass away and so does Judah's wife. Tamar isn't getting any younger and has had it up to here with waiting, finally realizing that Judah has no intention of marrying her off to Shelah.

So, as Genesis chapter 38 relates, in uncomfortable detail, Tamar devises a cunning plan, disguising herself as a – well – “woman of the evening” - and batting her veiled eyes at the side of the road where she knows Judah would be travelling on a business trip. The old goat falls for it and negotiations ensue, the final price a fresh young goat. Since Judah doesn't carry goats with him, Tamar impounds his I.D., in the form of his engraved walking staff. When, a few months later, her fellow villagers discover Tamar is pregnant and report her conduct to Judah, the old hypocrite sentences her to death by fire, but at the last minute she produces Judah's staff, his Golden Age card which he left as a deposit, and upon much clearing of the throat he forgives her, saying, in a manner of modern public figures, it really was his fault after all, now that the evidence had been made public.

And a few months later were made public the twins Perez and Zerah, sons of the father of their mother's first and second husbands. But the story of Tamar does not end there. For as Matthew carefully records, Tamar's great, great, great etcetera grandson was none other than Jesus Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords.

You may be scandalized that Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute. It may, then, be of some comfort to you that, as we jump ahead some eight hundred years, our second female ancestress is none other than Rahab, who was a genuine harlot, no disguises and no bones about it.

Here's the background. After Moses died and Joshua was given command of the wandering Hebrew nation, he sent some spies into the then-unconquered Promised Land to check out the territory, particularly the city of Jericho. Inexplicably, the first place the spies ended up was a brothel, run by our new friend Rahab. Equally strange, some government officials were also visiting the establishment and, spotting the Israelite spies, sent word to the King, who, somehow or other, knew the place and Rahab by name. He sent word to her to throw them out into the welcoming arms of the law.

Rahab was a quick-thinking business woman who didn't get where she was yesterday by throwing paying guests out into the street. Hiding them under the insulation in the attic, she mentioned to the King that yes, some travellers had

dropped by, but she didn't catch their names. If the King was quick, though, he might catch them, for they went thataway. And off the king went.

Rahab knew the fellows upstairs were big business, so she cut a deal. She would get them out of the city if they would spare her and her family when the invasion came, she said, and the Hebrew spies readily agreed, giving her a red cord to tie around her window so they would be sure to find her again. This she did, and when the invasion came, Joshua himself made sure Rahab and her loved ones were safe and sound before they burned the city to the ground. And, the Bible says,

*So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel (Joshua 6:23).* “Outside,” you notice.

But outsider or not, Rahab, the hero harlot, was, as Matthew points out, the great, great, great etcetera grandmother of Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And she was also the mother of Boaz.

We hear about Boaz in the book of Ruth. One day while making the rounds of his many business concerns, Boaz spotted a woman following the grain threshers, gleaning the fields, picking up what was left behind. Just the sight of her made old Boaz feel young again, and he rolled out a red carpet the likes of which the young woman had never seen. And the name of that young woman was Ruth.

Now Ruth had not had an easy life. She had been widowed young, and was living with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, who decided to return to her homeland – Bethlehem, in fact - after many years away. Naomi encouraged Ruth to stay behind, but Ruth responded with a beautiful poem, which, curiously, is used in many weddings to this day, although seldom read by a bride to her mother-in-law: *“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”* So it was off to Bethlehem together.

But then as today, things were tough back in the old home-town of Bethlehem, and there were few employment opportunities for widows at the best of times, so Ruth was reduced to gathering the leftover grain in the fields, after the harvesters had gone through, as was the right of the impoverished in Ruth's day. She chose a field owned by a fellow named Boaz, who happened to be a distant relative of Naomi, and as Ruth gleaned, she caused a gleam in old Boaz's eye, who wasn't too old to recognise a pretty girl when he saw one, which brings us back to our story.

After treating her to a five-star meal, Boaz told Ruth she was welcome to gather all the grain she pleased, and he even instructed his foreman to leave a fair bit laying around. He also spread the word that the farm hands were to keep their hands off of Ruth, and so she was safe from molestation, an apparently rare luxury. But before you get comfortable and think we have finally hit a wholesome story, listen to the beginning of Chapter 3:

*One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to Ruth, “My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”*

*“I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered.*

So, Ruth followed her mother-in-law’s plan to the letter, and during the night Boaz woke with his normally cold feet pleasantly warmed against an undoubtedly female form (I’m trying to be careful here; this is a family show). “Who are you,” he asked, and was greeted with the dulcet tones and intriguing accent of the good Ruth, who then rushed the plan a bit by asking Boaz to marry her, but, curiously enough, he was not offended by her forward nature and agreed, inviting her to spend the rest of the night just where she was. And so she did, and it wasn’t long before she too was great with child.

And Ruth, whose love warmed an old man’s feet and melted his old man’s heart, was the great-grandmother of King David, no less, and the great, great, great etcetera grandmother of Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And so we come to the end of the line, but for one final woman. And you know, the amazing thing is that Matthew doesn’t mention her by name, not exactly, apparently just unable to bring himself to spell it out. It is no good trying to pretend that he forgot it, because it is a famous name, indeed. I am sure it is more familiar to you than Tamar or Rahab, her story more familiar than that of Ruth. The name is Bathsheba, and you might remember her as the one who took a long bath, outside on her roof, in the gentle breeze of a warm Jerusalem night, the light of the moon playing upon her oiled skin, glistening like a peeled pear, as she fell under the amorous gaze of the King.

And yet Matthew doesn’t mention her name, just describes her as Solomon’s mother, the woman who had been Uriah’s wife. Ah, but what a damning little reference that is. You see, Uriah was the man whom Good King David had had

killed, so that he could carry on an affair with Bathsheba without the inconvenience of a jealous husband to worry about; a plot which met with Bathsheba's pleasure. There was plenty more to say about Bathsheba, plenty bad and little good, but this was the bit which Matthew wanted us to remember, like a slap in the face, like a kick in the pants, like an ugly family story which we would rather forget. "*The wife of Uriah*," Matthew calls her. And therefore the mistress of King David, no less, and yet, too, the great, great, great etcetera grandmother of Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. They are none of them good Presbyterians, these ladies, they are not the ones likely to be honoured for their work with the AMS, not the likely choices for Eldership or Clergy. Yet Matthew adds them to his list, to the exclusion of all other women (save Mary), picking them out of the long line of worthies, dangling them like so many skeletons in the closet; an incestuous daughter-in-law, a harlot, a foreigner with a penchant for climbing into old men's beds in the middle of the night, and an exhibitionist social climber whom any decent court would find an accessory to murder.

And in making his list, in writing this uncomfortable genealogy, Matthew is saying that there is hope for us all, that from the unhappiest and most unlikely of beginnings can come a miracle, can come a wonder, can come a Christ. And that's important for us to hear, and important for us to know.

Because maybe there are things about our past, maybe there are things about our lives of which we are ashamed, which cause us to wonder how God could love us, how God could use us, how God could take the dross of our lives and turn it into gold. There may be times when, like Tamar, we feel abandoned and wasted, cast aside and forgotten; when, like Rahab, we seem to be less worthy than any other; when, like Ruth, we seem to be struggling simply to survive or when, like Bathsheba, we have taken a path from which we cannot seem to turn, despite what we know or think is the right thing to do: and yet, says Matthew; and yet, from the unhappiest and most unlikely of beginnings can come a miracle, can come a wonder, can come a Christ. For where we are, there God is. And where there is God, there is hope for us all.

Thanks be to God, for these women. Thanks be to God for each one of us, women and men. Thanks be to God for loving us all, for using us to his good purpose. And thanks be to God, who from our lives; empty, unhappy, unseemly, ashamed: who from our lives brings Christ to the world. Amen.